

OPINION

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Micron makeover

Is computer giant just another fairy tale?

Nebraska, Oklahoma and Utah have all been putting on their best faces.

They're dressing up for the prince—Micron. But only one of them can be Cinderella.

All three states have tried to seduce powerful Micron by falling at its feet with tailor-made engineering education, tax-breaks and other economic incentives.

Nebraska legislators have put in their pitch. Monday they passed the final two bills of an economic incentive designed to entice the computer-chip company to the state.

The University of Nebraska joined in the fury last week as it vowed to speed up engineering upgrades on the Omaha campus in an effort to lure the \$1.3 billion giant to the Heartland.

But will Nebraska be the bride and not the bridesmaid this time?

Maybe the governor, the Legislature and the department of economic development have put enough makeup on Nebraska's labor shortage and "brain drain" to succeed where they failed in luring BMW and Mercedes-Benz.

Nebraska's population has seen little growth in the last 20 years, large numbers of college graduates leave the state every year because they can't find jobs in Nebraska and many companies already are having trouble finding employees.

But Micron is the type of company that goes a long way toward changing that.

There are questions about whether or not Nebraska could provide the 3,500 employees Micron needs. But Sen. Don Wesely of Lincoln, on the floor of the Legislature, said Monday that Micron could find the employees it needed.

"Should a company come in with good jobs, good wages, good benefits, they will find employees and they will be outstanding," Wesely said.

Membership in the kingdom of Micron would bring those kinds of jobs and the royal treasure of benefits that accompany an economic influx of this kind.

Ernie Goss, a business researcher at Creighton University, told The Associated Press that the construction project alone would put 45,000 people to work and generate \$3.4 billion in Nebraska's economy.

Gov. Nelson has said the incentives used to entice Micron also could be applied to other companies.

"Nebraska is gaining a reputation of a good place to grow a business," Nelson said.

If that is so, Nebraska could be turning the corner on a bright economic future. The decision comes tomorrow. Maybe Micron won't go the way of BMW and Mercedes-Benz.

It's almost midnight. Will the glass slipper fit and will Nebraska live happily ever after? Or when the clock strikes, will Nebraska once again be seen as just an ugly step-sister?

In one breath

Roger Bjorklund is making headlines again. Defense attorneys in the bizarre triple murder trial in Falls City want Bjorklund to rebut testimony from a jailhouse informant.

What gives the defense any reason to believe Bjorklund? He often changed his story during his own 1993 murder trial.

Prosecutors have said transferring Bjorklund raises safety factors, but it shouldn't. Bjorklund has taken many rides with police, whether it be to eat or in search of a weapon. What attorneys should be concerned with is his credibility.

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Health Nazis take on enemy

Try to imagine America as a cavernous and rather popular restaurant. You walk through the doorway on any given day, and the maitre d' immediately asks your preference for the country's future. What will it be: Smoking or Non-Smoking?

Faced with this choice, most Americans have decided to take their place in the non-smoking section of this public health argument. Even smokers, backed into small corners under exhaust fans, have tended to agree.

But a not-so-funny thing is happening on the way to a smoke-free environment. The public debate is shifting deliberately and subtly. The anti-smoking campaign has come up against a new enemy: the anti-anti-smoking campaign. The old enemy — the tobacco chieftains — is now matched against a new enemy — the health chieftains.

The maitre d' now offers a very different choice of designated seating to Americans. What will it be: "Freedom-Loving Individualists" or "Health Nazis?" Take your pick.

In the courts, the tobacco crowd is on the defensive. In just the past week, Mississippi and Florida both filed huge suits demanding that the cigarette companies rather than the taxpayers ante up for smoke-related illnesses. A federal judge in New Orleans has cleared the way for a gigantic nationwide class-action suit by a consortium of 60 law firms on behalf of 100 million smokers and former smokers.

But outside the courtroom, it's a different scene. The label slapped onto this by the tobacco industry is sticking. The perverse warning about the dangers of anti-smoking extremists, of big government and



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uncivil non-libertarians has been taken up by conservatives with something approaching glee.

This month, the cover story of The American Spectator is a satire about smoking in New York. Most of its barbs are pointed at anti-smoking yuppies who "almost all think of themselves as allies in a moral and ecological crusade."

The National Review has a piece by a writer in the throes of nicotine withdrawal. But he lauds the "renewed popularity" of smoking, calling it "a swipe at all Health Nazis, part of what commentators are calling a nationwide 'conservative renaissance.'"

Cigarettes and conservatives are being packaged together as tightly these days as the radio and the right wing. Not surprisingly, Rush Limbaugh, the right's gift to cigar manufacturers, is a regular in the attack pack.

This is one way for conservatives to keep peace with those whose political lives are tethered to tobacco. A star of this group is Virginia's Tom Bliley, a pro-tobacco mortician who now heads a House subcommittee on health and the environment. Talk about conflict of interest. Then there is Tennessee's Sen. Bill Frist, a heart and lung transplant surgeon, who may tell his patients to quite smoking but promises his constituents to defend "smokers' rights."

Just a year ago, a very different Congress held hearings to show how the tobacco folk kept smokers hooked, calibrating the dose of nicotine and even changing the tobacco gene. There was talk of regulating nicotine like any other drug. Now there's hardly a puff of concern coming out of the Capitol.

The linkage of the right wing with the wrong stuff isn't complete. It appalls those like Beth Whalen who describes herself as a "politically conservative Newt Gingrich person and an anti-smoking activist. As head of the American Council on Science and Health, she says angrily, "I'm tired of being called a Health Nazi."

Indeed, for all its conservative chic, an oligopoly of a half-dozen cigarette makers isn't much of a role model for a free market. Nor is a business that kills its customers.

For that matter, the purest libertarian, the person who believes that we should be free to cruise down the highway of life at any speed, in any condition, without a government license or a helmet law, still makes a distinction between adults and children. But cigarette advertising targets children. The number of kids who leave high school as confirmed smokers hasn't gone down in a decade.

Now adults are being sold the tobacco party line in politics: smoking as freedom. But the cigarette makes a perverse icon to liberty. The freedom to get hooked? The right to addiction?

The issue isn't "Health Nazis." It's still health. The only "Freedom-Loving Individualists" that the tobacco industry cares about are the ones in need of another fix.

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